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Identification

The Thonga (Bathonga, Batonga, Tonga), often called Shangana (Amashangana, Shangaan, Tshangaan), are included with the Hlengwe and the Ronga in the great Shangana-Tonga nation, with a total population in excess of one million. The languages of these tribes, with those of the Nguni and Sotho nations, form the Southeastern Bantu division of the Bantu linguistic family. The component tribal and sub-tribal divisions of the Thonga proper are as follows:

1. Djonga or Khosa division--Hlavi (Bahlabi, Vahlavi), Khosa (Cossine, Khosen, Makhosa), Rikotjo (Rikoto), and Shiwuri (Shibouri, Shiburi).
2. Nwalungu division--Loyi (Baloyi, Loi, Valoyi) and Maluleke (Malouleke),
3. Hlanganu division--Hlanganu (Hlanganou, Vahlanganu), Mabila, Nwamba, and remnants of the true Shangana (of Nguni origin).
4. Bila or Mvanati division--Bila (Bilene) and Khambana.
5. Bvesha (Magwamba) and other emigrants into the Transvaal, mainly of Thonga but partly also of Hlengwe origin.

Basic Economy

Primarily agricultural. The staple is maize, followed by "Kafir corn" (a millet called mabele, which is the oldest cereal and the most heavily incrusted with ritual). Sorghum, groundnuts, manioc, and pumpkins are also important crops; sweet potatoes, beans, 'Kafir peas' (an earth fruit like groundnuts), and a little rice and eleusine are also grown. No manure or fertilizer is used. Goats are the oldest and most numerous animals; they are used mainly for sacrifices and hospitality. Cattle, numerous before the Nguni invasions when they were plundered, have since recovered; they are socially important (for bride-prices) but not ritually significant like goats. Chickens are common and old rather than recent; eggs are eaten. Sheep are rare and pigs recent. Hunting is important, fishing moderately so. Caterpillars, locusts, termites, and larvae are collected for food. The Thonga are addicted to barter and trade.

Sex Division of Labor

Young men herd and milk the cattle, which are taboo to women. Boys herd and milk the goats. The men hunt and fish. The women do most of the agricultural work, including even land clearance and

threshing. However, each man has a private garden; he plants it and harvests from it, but his wife weeds it. Women gather.

Property

Cattle constitute the chief wealth. Iron hoes once used for bride-price. Land belongs to paramount chiefs; local headmen allocate hereditary usufruct to individuals.

Patrilineal inheritance prevails for cattle and all other property. These, together with widows, are distributed among younger brothers and sons--usually with one as trustee, obligated to provide bride-prices for the others. In default of immediate patrilineal heirs, sisters' sons rather than remoter patrilineal kinsmen inherit. In any event, sisters' sons exercise their property privilege against their maternal uncle to claim a few objects from the estate, e.g., spears.

Social Stratification

No slavery.

Marriage

A substantial bride-price (of lobola type) is paid to WiFa--preferably in cattle, though iron hoes, brass rings, and trade beads (but never goats) have been used in the past, and money oftentimes today. The bride-price received for a sister is commonly used to secure a wife for her brother, but a man without sisters may work and accumulate cattle and is usually helped by his Fa, FaBr's, Br's, and FaSo's. The recipient is the WiFa, but a definite share always goes to the bride's MoBr. An alternative mode for a man without property or prospects of obtaining enough for a bride-price is to elope with a girl to the village of the latters MoBr; since no bride-price is paid, their children belong to the mother's patrilineal kin; usually, however, the husband attempts to assemble a bride-price later to regularize his marriage, or in lieu thereof uses the bride-price of a Da for his Wi.

Polygyny is general and preferred, and is preferentially though by no means exclusively sororal. The first wife is the "great wife." Each co-wife has her own hut.

Family

The nuclear family is the hosehold group. Polygynous families,

though strongly functional, are united into a large patrilocal extended family, which is coextensive with the settlement or "kraal."

Residence

The patrilocal rule is the norm. Except occasionally for older men, whose children have grown up, residence is never matrilocal, for it is taboo for a girl to remain in her own village after her bride-price is received. However, a man with no patrilineal heirs to carry on his line may require a sister to remain in his village with him. She does not marry or receive a bride-price, but she takes lovers; her children belong to and live with her brother, and the males continue his village and line. Avunculocal residence is normal in childhood; boys and girls, when weaned, go to live in the village of their MoBr for several years, girls sometimes until they are full-grown. A form of avunculocal residence also occurs in cases of elopement when no bride-price is paid.

Kin Groups and Exogamy

Marriage is always exogamous with respect to the settlement or "kraal."

Kindreds and bilinear kin groups are almost certainly absent. Marriage is forbidden with any first cousin, cross or parallel.

There are agamous, non-totemic patri-sibs, each with an hereditary chief and bearing the name of its male founder [sibs are really greatly expanded patri-families]. They are divided into patri-lineages, which (or parts of which) are localized as clans. Even the patri-lineage is not fully exogamous [except for the minor patri-lineage which is localized], for marriage is permitted with a third cousin in the paternal line, and even with a second cousin after a special ban-breaking ceremony. There is no exogamy with respect to the mother's patri-lineage.

Junod, effectively countering Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation of the avunculate, cites the following probable survivals of former matrilineal descent:

a. Avunculocal residence of a child after weaning.
b. Raising heirs by an unmarried sister in default of patrilineal heirs.
c. Avunculocal residence in cases of elopement without bride-price.
d. The sharing of the MoBr of a woman in her bride-price.
e. The partial claim of sisters' sons in a man's estate.

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f. Assignment of district chiefships by paramount chiefs to sisters' sons.

g. The fact that the officiant at all important sacrifices for a man, including those at his funeral, is regularly his MoBr (or MoBrSo in his stead).

Kinship Terminology

Fa--tanana, rara, baba. Mo--manana, Ch--ngwana. Hu--nuna. Wi--nsati.

Avuncular and nepotic terminology is usually of bifurcate merging type, but is lineal for FaSi-BrCh terms. There is especially strong avoidance with WiBrWi. She cannot be married except under highly special conditions, namely, if Ego's wife dies and his wife's male relatives are unable either to refund the bride-price or supply a substitute; Ego may then take his WiBrWi away from his WiBr as his own wife, since she was bought with his cattle.

Cousin terms conform to the Omaha pattern.

Settlement Pattern

There are settled communities--small villages or hamlets called "kraals." A kraal is composed of round huts with wattle-and-daub walls and low, conical, grass-thatched roofs. These are arranged at first in an arc, and grow in time into a complete circle (every man's ambition). They are surrounded by a circular fence of thorny branches (not a stockade). The headman's hut stands opposite the main gate. In the very center is a circular cattle corral, and there are smaller corrals for goats, pigs, and calves, chicken houses, sheds, and special huts for unmarried men and for unmarried girls. Near the entrance is an enclosed meeting place for the men.

Community Organization

The "kraal" is a large patrilocal extended family and constitutes a patrilocal clan-community. Its constituent huts are occupied by the wives and children of the headman, his younger brothers, and his married sons. When its founder dies, and his estate is distributed, his successor establishes a new kraal.

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Local Government

The headman of the kraal is the patriarch of the resident patri-family. Succession is patrilineal--by a YoBr, then a So, then a SiSo (if no patrilineal heirs).

State

Kraals are politically aggregated into districts with appointive sub-chiefs, who are usually the sons, sisters' sons, or other relatives of the paramount chief. The latter is a powerful ruler (over a tribe rather than the entire Thonga nation) with many of the attributes of a divine king; he is surrounded by taboos and possesses special regalia. He lives in a capital village, and is advised by a council consisting of his elder male kinsmen, military leaders, agents, and district chiefs. His court also includes favorites or messengers, a herald, and a Public Vituperator or court jester. He receives tribute in kind (agricultural products and a share of game killed), in money, and in labor. He is ultimately succeeded by his ElSo, but apparently not until after his younger uterine brothers have ruled. The heir apparent is born and reared in secrecy, and is not allowed to marry. When the king dies, this fact is kept secret for a year or more. Then an elaborate installation ceremony is held; the new king marries (his great wife will bear the heir presumptive), usually a member of the royal family of a neighboring tribe; when she arrives at the capital, the king sets his young men to work building him a new capital village.

Warfare

The Thonga are not particularly warlike.

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